CIA/ALA---95-40346

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APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JUN 2007

Intelligence Memorandum

Office of African and Latin American Analysis — *15 May 1995*

EO 12958 1.4(c)<25Yrs
EO 12958 1.4(d)<25Yrs
EO 12958 6.2(c)
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Colombia: Top Advisers, Prosecutor General Hold Key to President's Future

President Samper's future rests largely with four Colombian officials—Government Minister Horacio Serpa, Defense Minister Fernando Botero, Foreign Minister Rodrigo Pardo, and Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso—who stand to play key roles as Samper attempts to refute recently revived allegations that he has ties to narcotics traffickers.

- Serpa, Botero, and Pardo, in addition to holding the most prominent ministerial portfolios, are Samper's closest advisers. ***Their continued support will be critical to his efforts to maintain credibility with the legislature and the public.***

- Thus far, they have expressed strong public backing for him. [redacted] they are ambitious and have reputations to protect, ***suggesting they may reconsider their support should definitive proof of Samper's ties to drug interests become public.***

- Valdivieso, who has no apparent connections to Samper, heads the independent office charged with investigating the allegations against the President. ***The Prosecutor General will play a pivotal role in determining the pace, scope, and seriousness of the investigation into the allegations.*** He already has arrested and charged several leading Liberal Party politicians for illicit enrichment ***and appears committed to pursuing allegations of narcotics corruption.***

- The Prosecutor General is moving with caution in investigating the President, however, and diplomatic reporting indicates he is sensitive to issues of sovereignty, ***suggesting he would resist overt pressure from US officials. Nevertheless, he has worked well with US officials in the past and is likely to be responsive to US inquiries and expressions of support.*** [redacted]

ALA 95-40346
TN 95-04112
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DRV FR: MULTIPLE
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Samper's Team Publicly Backing Him . . .

President Ernesto Samper's top advisers—Government Minister Horacio Serpa, Defense Minister Fernando Botero, and Foreign Minister Rodrigo Pardo—have given strong public backing to his efforts to stave off the most recent media charges that his campaign accepted contributions from narcotics traffickers and that he has met with Cali kingpins. According to [redacted] and press accounts, Samper's advisers have worked—with some success—to discourage the publication of negative stories about the Samper government. For example, they succeeded in convincing the publishers of the newsweekly *Semana* to substantially modify a story published in early April on Samper's alleged meeting with Cali kingpins in 1989, according to US diplomats. Samper and his top advisers have also persuaded congressional, business, and local political leaders to publicly back the administration. [redacted] Serpa, Botero, and Pardo have close and longstanding ties to the President, who relies heavily on them for advice on key policy matters. All held top positions in Samper's 1994 presidential campaign and backed him in his unsuccessful bid for the Liberal Party's presidential nomination in 1990. [redacted]

. . . But Support for the "Chameleon" President Could Be Weak

As a politician who has displayed little loyalty to others in the past, however, Samper may have reason to question the depth of his advisers' loyalty to him. Media [redacted] reports reveal that supporters and opponents alike view Samper as a political chameleon who has shifted his ideology, policy positions, and allies over the years to suit his own political purposes. In a May 1985 conversation [redacted] for example, Liberal Party boss Eduardo Mestre described Samper as "supremely opportunistic" and unresponsive to anything but his own ambitions. Botero told [redacted] in 1989 that Samper was a "political opportunist" who seeks popular support wherever he can find it, "sleeps with a public opinion poll by his pillow," and constantly checks the prevailing political winds before adopting a position on controversial issues. [redacted]

Various reporting also suggests that Samper's top advisers are themselves highly ambitious and concerned with protecting their reputations and political futures. Botero is the most ambitious of Samper's advisers and views his post as a potential launching pad for a presidential bid, according to [redacted] press reports. The Defense Minister, however, has been the subject of speculation that as Samper's campaign manager he must have known about alleged trafficker donations to the campaign. Serpa, too, has long harbored presidential ambitions, [redacted]

[redacted]

note, and already has expressed concern over the possible impact on his reputation of allegations against Samper.

In addition, Samper's team of top advisers has been plagued by rivalry and infighting, particularly between Botero and Serpa. The stress of defending Samper against drug allegations could exacerbate existing tensions and lead one or more of the advisers to break ranks with the President. Although all of the top advisers are members of the Liberal Party, they hold diverging views on some key policy issues, For example, Botero hails from the party's right wing and espouses a tougher line on counternarcotics and counterinsurgency issues than does Serpa, who is the standard bearer of the party's more traditional left wing and whose views are closer to those of the President, The two Ministers have argued publicly over counterinsurgency policy, and report that Samper had to intervene to mend fences between them earlier this year. Pardo, for his part, has stayed out of the Botero-Serpa disputes, but his policy views are closer to those of Serpa and Samper, according to press reports.

Prosecutor General Poised To Play Lead Role

Samper's fate may hinge to a greater extent on Prosecutor General Alfonso Valdivieso, whose office is constitutionally charged with investigating all criminal offenses and is independent of the executive. Although he is a member of the ruling Liberal Party, Valdivieso has no apparent personal ties to the President and was not Samper's preferred choice for the post, The Prosecutor General stunned the Bogota political establishment in late April when he announced the arrest of Liberal Party stalwart Mestre on charges of illicit enrichment in connection with drug trafficking and the unprecedented investigations into several high-level Liberal Party politicians—including the President of the Chamber of Representatives and the Comptroller of the Republic. The announcement of the arrests and investigations came just as Samper appeared to have put an earlier round of media allegations against him to rest, according to press accounts.

Valdivieso appears to be proceeding with caution in investigating allegations against the President. He has emphasized repeatedly in public remarks that the recent investigations and arrests of Liberal Party politicians are not related to allegations against Samper. According to both media reports, however, in his

prosecution of these Liberal Party politicians the Prosecutor General is relying on the same documents that allegedly reveal donations by Cali traffickers to Samper's campaign. Valdivieso has consistently told journalists [redacted] that he will proceed diligently but methodically in pursuing the allegations against the President. Reflecting his characteristic caution, Valdivieso told [redacted] upon taking office in August 1994 that he intends to do his job with all due professionalism, but that he is not a hero and has to "think of his wife and family," adding that he would resign if pressured too much by either the executive or the traffickers. Valdivieso cited the assassinations of former presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan and former Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara as examples of what happens to officials who become "obsessed" with fighting narcotics traffickers. Valdivieso has one year to pursue the investigation; he was appointed by the Supreme Court to complete the remainder of his predecessor's term and cannot be reappointed, [redacted]

[redacted]

Outlook and Implications

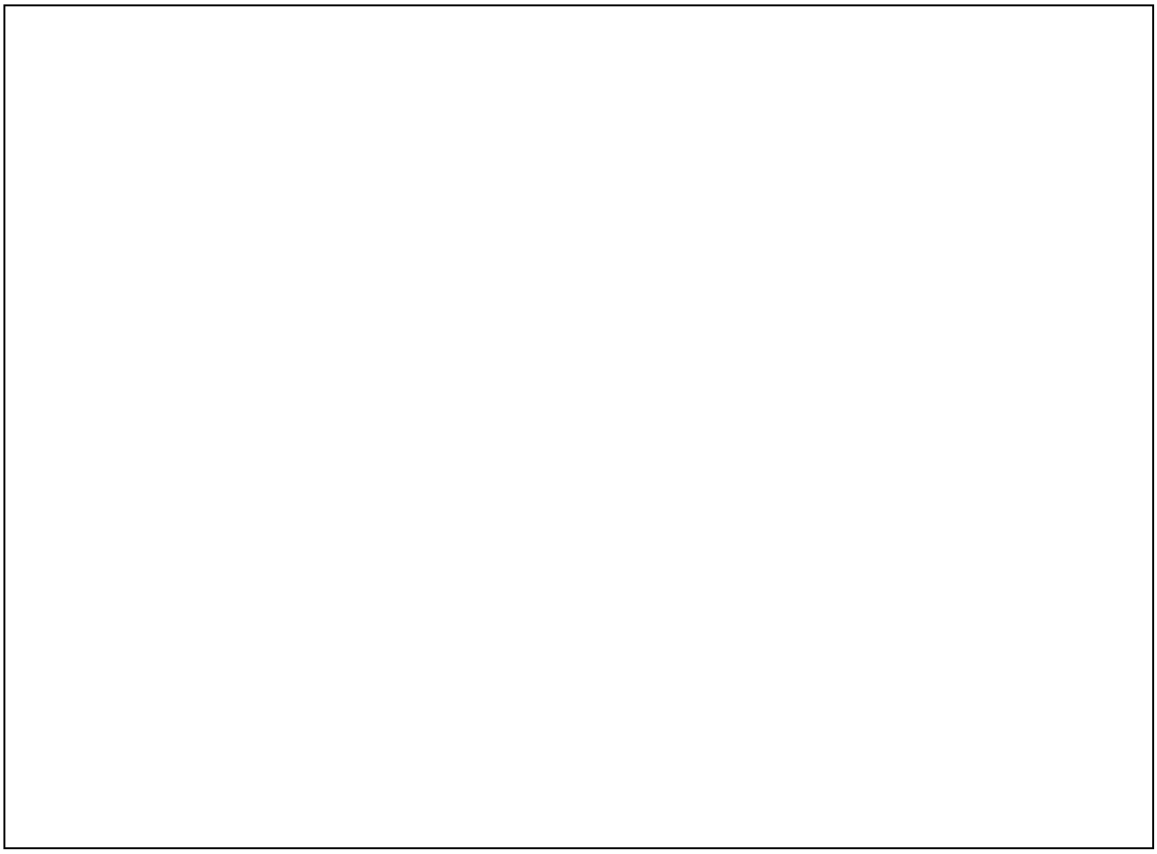
Because of their close ties to the President, Samper's key advisers are likely to continue to back him absent a public revelation of definitive proof directly linking the President to drug traffickers. Samper's top advisers are ambitious, however, suggesting they could reevaluate their continued support for him to protect their reputations and political futures. Without their support, Samper would be increasingly vulnerable to attacks by political opponents and hard pressed to recoup his political standing. He probably would also have difficulty finding replacements willing to serve in an administration so dogged by scandal. [redacted]

The infighting among Samper's key advisers, which thus far has caused only minor problems for the President, could intensify and lead to major fissures in the Cabinet, particularly if more damaging information emerges. Because he is the most ambitious of the three key advisers and because his policy views differ most from those of Samper and the other advisers, Botero could be the first to withdraw his support if evidence is found that links the President to traffickers. [redacted]

Valdivieso holds the key to the success of the investigation of Samper's alleged drug ties, and the President lacks the institutional power or personal clout with Valdivieso to rein him in. Valdivieso remains vulnerable to political pressure and trafficker threats, however, and may slow the investigation—or quit his post—should the pressure get too high. [redacted]

Valdivieso has been open and cooperative with US officials, [redacted] Like most Colombian officials, however, Valdivieso is sensitive to perceived infringements on national sovereignty and probably would not respond well to overt US pressure to delve more deeply into the allegations against the President.

Nonetheless, his willingness to work with US officials in the past suggests that he would respond positively to US inquiries on the progress of the investigations and to continued expressions of support for his work, particularly if they appeal to his pride and sense of duty. Such keen US interest—in addition to continued domestic media pressure—may be necessary to keep Valdivieso on track as political and trafficker pressures mount to sway him from the investigations.



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